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Steel and Flowers

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STEEL AND FLOWERS

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STEEL AND FLOWERS

BY

RONALD LEWIS CARTON

(Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry)

LONDON

ELKIN MATHEWS, CORK STREET

MCMXVII



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TO

NO. 13 PLATOON : "THE DEVIL'S OWN"

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STEEL AND FLOWERS

The Ballad of Frimley Town

(OCTOBER, 1914)

THE soldiermen through Frimley town
Go marching day by day ;
And some to sleep shall lay them down
On Belgian fields burned black and brown,
Nor heed the maids of Frimley town
That call to them alway.

The sun on Frimley town that shines
Looks down on Mons and Lille ;
Here, by the autumn firs and pines,
On flag and bayoneted lines,
On sword and spur and trump it shines,
But there on redder steel.

THE BALLAD OF FRIMLEY TOWN

But when the paler lamps of night
 Gleam dimly on the plains,
The living relics of the fight
May see that softer, fairer light
That lit their steps some summer night
 Through scented Surrey lanes.

And John, whose shoulder gives him pain,
 And Bill, whose knees are numb,
And Tom, who swears he'll fight again,
And Ted, whose pal is with the slain,
And thinks hurt hearts hold most of pain,
 Dream, while the guns are dumb.

Yes, Frimley town is far away
 When shadows strew the ground.
The men who sleep, the girls who pray,
The children who forget to play,
Together walk down Frimley way,
 Until the bugles sound.

O women with your patient eyes,
 Whence flow the hot tears down,
Beyond these black, war-smitten skies,
There is a lasting Paradise,
To be beholden of your eyes,
 More fair than Frimley town.

Awakening

O I HAVE plucked the fruit of stars
Ripened on Autumn eves,
And put my sickle in the Sun
And bound his gold in sheaves,
And gathered on Parnassus Hill
The scented blooms and leaves.

And I have sought the dawn-bright pearl
Far hidden in the deep,
Fairer than tears that dim the moon
When the sad angels weep,
And brought dream-laden argosies
Across the seas of sleep.

Midnight has borne my soul away
To lands of song and flowers,
Where silver bells shed melody
From burnished agate towers,
And love and youth go hand in hand,
Through all the golden hours.

AWAKENING

But did I travel Heaven and Earth
Surely I'd come again
To smell the clover-laden wind,
To taste the sudden rain,
To see the roses in the hedge
In any Devon lane.

To look on billowy fields of wheat,
Gold, green and scarlet blent,
The melting grey and heather-soft
Wide waves of Surrey, bent
By winds that shake, in orchard trees,
The pink and white of Kent.

And where, save here at home, may I,
Standing on down or tor,
Watch the red swooning sun pour out
His spirit on Exmoor,
And fade in flickers of faint flame
Below the Severn shore ?

My blood is in the Autumn trees
That crowd the banks of Dart,
It throbs in ev'ry shaking reed
Where Thames and Cotswold part,
And all the song of Hertfordshire
Comes echoing in my heart !

AWAKENING

O never seemed the Weald so fair,
The Malvern Hills so green.
Nor twixt the fields of Warwickshire,
Where Shakespeare's feet have been,
Avon's unflurried seaward flow
So consciously serene,

As now when ev'ry fleeting wind
Whispers a thing abhorred,
And hands that twitch with sateless greed
Come groping hitherward,
And men who walk behind the plough
Look down, and see a sword.

Can it be alien feet may tread
The paths that I have trod?
And shall the foreign ploughshare break
Next year, a Sussex clod,
I, be a slave, in those same fields
Where late I walked with God?

We who were nurtured on thy breast,
Whose blood is thine, whose days
Were only happy when the sun
Lit feet that trod thy ways,
Who ever seek and vainly seek
England, to speak thy praise.

AWAKENING

Here is the best pledge of our love,
Proof of our praise, that we
Arise, bind up our fate with thine,
Go forth beyond the sea,
And stand, a living barrier,
Between thy foes and thee.

Return

I SHALL step outward to the night,
The night unguessed, unplumbed, unknown,
And you beside a shaded light,
Will sing the old sweet songs alone.

Kissed cold of steel, caressed of flame,
And right or wrong, by law or chance,
A cross with a familiar name,
Will mark one silence more in France.

But when the perfume from your hair
Is gone, your springtime fragrance o'er,
Perhaps some kindly wind will bear,
My dust home to your cottage door.

An Interlude

TOUCHED by her hands the vibrant strings
Respond in dulcet murmurings
Of quaver, chord and semitone.
Sweet as soft odours vaguely blown
From gardens where the throstle sings.

The almond blossom from the tree
Falls not to earth more tenderly
Than fall upon the tranced gloom,
In rhythmic cadence, bloom by bloom,
These flow'rs of mystic melody.

Where the gaunt pine-trees cut the night
Wanders a poet, hid from sight,
Who darkly hides within his heart
And carries to a place apart,
Each fragrant echo of delight.

Hereafter

It's Autumn-time on Salisbury Plain.

Let it be Autumn-time again

When life is cured of this black pain

And I go home, go home again,

By Highgate on the Hill.

For there's a little wood I know

Where all the trees of wonder grow,

And shadows like cool waters flow

'Twixt ivied banks on beds of moss,—

Mingle and merge and fade and cross.

And you may come and you may go

And never in that holy place

Look upon a German face.

The trees have all grown as they will

In the wood by Highgate on the Hill :

Great oaks with many a lichen sash

And elm and birch, and may and ash,

In twos and threes they stand together

In all the splendid autumn weather.

HEREAFTER

And in between and left and right
Are laurel bushes green and bright.
Acorns and chestnuts patter down
On leaves all gold and red and brown,
All gold and red and brown and grey
That dance the afternoon away.

October's quick and golden rains
Wander in rivers down the lanes,
Or make, in hollows, little ponds
Where pebbles shine like diamonds.
From breakfast-time till after tea
In ev'ry branch of ev'ry tree
The starlings, like a lot of boys,
For love of life make heaps of noise :
Such noise,—there is no gladder sound
In all the glad year's tuneful round
Such placid anger, peaceful rage—
What actors on what airy stage
What comedy for what a wage !
Children and birds and autumn trees,—
The world were well content with these.

When bloody William and his son
Are safely dead at last, and one
May go believing there's no dearth

HEREAFTER

Of glory yet upon the Earth,—
A glory, not of fire and smoke
And things that burst and blind and choke,
A wonder, not of eyes that turn
To some new thing to blast and burn,
A wisdom, not of thrusts and stabs
And stripes and stars and scarlet tabs,
A worship, not of poisoned breath
And little children done to death,—
These shall delight my soul at last
When then is now and now is past,
Where the many-scented dews distil
In the wood by Highgate on the Hill.
There I shall find forgotten themes,
And empty husks of faded dreams
Whose seed, far scattered, soon or late,
Shall find soft soil and germinate ;
Remember I am still a boy
And haply rediscover joy,
Youth and all that follows after
Vanished vision and lost laughter.
All the wood will shout and sing
At my great remembering.
Ev'ry leaf will be a voice
Tuned to welcome and rejoice,
Sky and wind and blade and tree
Stretch forth hands to welcome me.

HEREAFTER

Deep in the wood lie hidden springs
Of half of life's delightful things.
A stirring leaf, a bird in flight
Will start soft flames of coloured light
That leap and dance and flash and burn
Through waving grass and feathery fern.
Music will tell an ancient tale
When moonrise wakes a nightingale.
Here is the rich, sweet smell of earth
Movement and melody and mirth :
Such mirth as flashes from the eyes
Of Gabriel in Paradise,
Such melody as when he sings,
Such movement as his flaming wings,
For woods and Paradise are one
When seen beneath an autumn sun.
I shall be home again and hear
Sounds that subdue the soul's worst fear.
I shall be home again and find
All that is pitiful and kind,
Healing for nerves left torn and sore
By red monotony of War.

O Wood by Highgate on the Hill,
When fighting's over be there still !

Reveill 

IN the place to which I go,
Better men than I have died.
Freeman friend and conscript foe,
Face to face and side by side,
In the shallow grave abide.

Melinite that seared their brains,
Gas that slew them in a snare,
War's inferno of strange pains,
What are these to them who share
That great boon of silence there?

When like blood the moon is red ;
And a shadow hides the sun,
We shall wake, the so-long dead,
We shall know our quarrel done,—
Will God tell us who has won?

The Daily Sacrifice

(JANUARY, 1915)

"More men, more men!" He heard the cry
And set his wife and children by,
For he who did not fear to die
Dared not to look on tears.

By hill and stream in lane and field,
He marched and turned and formed and wheeled,
Body and soul and brain did yield
Through weeks that seemed like years,—

Till came that bitter brutal day
When twenty miles of ocean lay
Twixt him and them ;—what use to pray
When bullets answer swift ?

THE DAILY SACRIFICE

Through days and nights of blood and sweat
He wrote "I am in safety yet——"
Then seemed his fingers to forget
His shattered fancy's drift.

They heard and neither wept nor curst,
Spoke soft his name. Sometimes rehearsed
The happy pride he had, when first
He stepped a Fusilier.

But waking in a widowed bed
His wife cried to the stars and said,
"I gave him willingly, but dead
I would his grave were here."

In Kent

(MAY, 1915)

FROM Rochester and Bethersden,
From Oxney Isle and Appledore
They went, the comeliest of men,
Rifle in hand, away to war.

They fight in Flanders. All the day
And all the night the hot blood runs.
In Kent the thrush pipes noon away,
In France they hear the song of guns.

The orchard blossom trembles white
About the slopes of Edenbridge,
Somewhere in France they die to-night
Who walked at dawn on such a ridge.

IN KENT

And he who found the primrose sweet
And wore it in his coat an hour,
In Chatham heard the war-drums beat
And pluckt in France another flower.

Round Staplehurst the fields are fair,—
O when will haply come again
The feet that walked behind the share,
The hands that sowed the yellow grain?

Daylong the crash of battle wakes
Its echo in the widow's ears,
Daylong the earth burns red and quakes
Where fight the Buffs and Fusiliers.

And still the lark sings on above,
The air is sweet with lilac scent;
O stay the harvest, God of Love,
Until our men come home to Kent.

Hallucination

UNDER the dripping skies,
Forgotten and forlorn,
She turns her sleepless eyes,
Unblessed in night and morn,
To where her lover lies.

So in unfriendly night
Her soul may watch him sleep,
And with the morning light
His steps her soul doth keep
In spiritual sight.

She saith, "A little bliss
I may in fancy find :
When blows the wind I wis
His arms are round me twined,
The raindrops are his kiss."

Mr. Starling

O STARLING, in the apple tree,
Sweet amateur in minstrelsy,
Wearing the blackbird's cast-off coat,
Mocking his golden-happy note,
Thou art a thing of utter blame.
O creature, with no sense of shame,
Enough of courage to maraud
Hast thou, of daring to defraud.
The raven black without and in
Is only bent on honest sin ;
But thou, less virtuous than he,
Dost practise sinful honesty.
Thou art an acrobat of sorts.
I see thee in thy daily sports
Performing for my delectation,
High in thy bleak and breezy station,
Such antics as no other feather
Would venture in this rheumy weather.
The arch dissembler of the trees,
Thief, scapegrace—thou art all of these.
And yet on roof and wall and bough
Best loved, thou bad, blithe bird art thou,
Starling,
For of all things that warble hoot or croak,
Thou art the one that canst enjoy a joke.

A Ballad of Essex in Winter-time

OF Sussex and of Wessex,
Of Devon, rich and red,
And all the men therefrom that went,
The maids with whose their fates were blent,
The word is sung and said,
But who shall sing of Essex ?

I wander here and wonder
That life may thuswise be
So loosely held by hands so frail,
That breath in failing does not fail,
Nor springs the spirit free
From threads that well-nigh sunder.

Grown grey of utter sorrow
For some unspoken thing,
The leagues of barren meadow lie
Beneath a bleak and barren sky,
Unkissed of any Spring
In any Winter's morrow.

A BALLAD OF ESSEX IN WINTER-TIME

The plains stretch wide and callow
Through countless hours adream ;
The wraiths of barn and cottage gaze
Upon the shapes of vanished days
That ever darkly gleam
In oozy marsh and shallow.

And he who has in keeping
A grief of empty years,
May find in these grey trees of eld
More sighs than any heart has held,
In ev'ry shadow tears,
A land grown wan in weeping.

By fold and ditch and burrow
The weed-strown waters wind.
The ploughman bending o'er his plough
Seems now a man, a goblin now ;
The crows flap sad and blind
O'er every empty furrow.

Night-long the sea winds revel
About the frozen coast ;
The sound rolls backward from the stars,
As if forgot at Heaven's bars,
Some disappointed ghost
Sought solace of the Devil.

A BALLAD OF ESSEX IN WINTER-TIME.

And where the murky river
 Weds with the sateless sea,
The doom-charged ships of battle lie,
The wood-piled London barges ply,
 And low round Manningtree
The pale lights glint and shiver.

Too tired for love or hating,
 Older it seems than death,
For sound too full of healthless sleep,
With nought to ask and nought to keep,
 And scarcely drawing breath,—
A land for ever waiting.

Yvonne

WHEN old Stephani plays
His magic violin
On Winter Saturdays,
Down at the Anchor Inn,
Some step beyond the door,
And some fall fast asleep,
But there are three or four
Who list, and two who weep.

Old bent Stephani plays
Strange tunes that he has found
In dim forgotten days,
And things put under ground.
His notes are words of rose
Soft scented, white and red ;
And there's one air he knows
That makes me wish him dead.

YVONNE

For when Stephani plays
 That tune of snow and flame,
I walk in shadowed days,
 And breathe a shadowed name.
Then they who laugh are two,
 And two there be who cry,
The bow, Yvonne, and you,
 The violin and I.

A Mid-Winter's Dream

I GATHERED moonbeams on a wintry shore
 When all the land lay frore,
And salt sea surf and starry icicles,
White wind-flung foam and opalate sea-shells,
And fairest weeds from deepest ocean strayed :
Of these I shaped in dreams a dream-fair maid.

And we were lovers in a world of frost, . . .
 She sang of good ships lost,
Of eyeless men who walk beneath the sea,
Of rusted anchor, pale anemone,
Of golden coins bestrewn on golden sand,
The ancient ocean's various contraband.

Her words were all of loss and change and death.
 The north wind was her breath ;
And on her cheek, her breast, her finger tips
Was ice, and ice was on her brow and lips,
And in the silver meshes of her hair,
And in her heart : and yet how she was fair !

A MID-WINTER'S DREAM

And now whene'er the chill wind whips my face,
And hangs the trees with lace,
And blows the sky's star-embers into flame,
I hear, 'mid song of surging seas, my name, . . .
Then do I launch my pale dream-galleon forth,
And close my eyes, and drift toward the North.

Ghost Company

WHEN all my friends are wed
And I am left alone,
Soft grass, the flowering bed,
A sundial of stone,
And one far-spreading lilac tree
In scented summer-time shall be
Most meet of company for me.

Then when I pluck a rose,
Or smell a jasmine spray,
My eyes shall look on those
Lost sweethearts of a day,—
Phyllis shall wake in asphodel,
And Mary in the lupin's bell,
And Kate, brown eyed, in pansies dwell.

When icicle and flake
Succeed green leaf and bloom,
A hearth of logs shall wake
Like dreams in winter gloom.
Thus shall each moment recompense
The falt'ring limb, the failing sense,
And charm my happy indolence.

The Fire Spell

WITHOUT, the rain falls, drear and cold :
The pavement shines like polished jet,
Save where the street lamps lace and fret
The streaming flags with shafts of gold.

The casement trembles as the wind
Goes headlong down the murky street ;
I hear the tramp of many feet
Pass and repass the window blind.

The smoke curls up in loose-spun skeins,
With gold flames joined in timeless dance ;
The fire spell holds me in a trance,
The noise of London wanes and wanes.

Across my hearth from far-off lands
A caravan procession goes :
My room is filled with musk and rose,
And turbaned men from desert sands.

I dream and dream till night's black noon
In twelve clear strokes the clock-tower tells ;
It is the sound of temple bells,
Borne vaguely 'neath a tropic moon.

March

WHEN dawn comes pallid into the sky,
With a laugh and a tear and a song in one,
And the white cloud chariots thunder by,
And the smitten hordes of winter run.
When the boughs of the gay green laurel dispart
Above the waiting choir of thrushes,
And the couched moorhen wakes and starts
With the sound of the wind that stirs the rushes,
And the wren sings high in the highest larch,
Then wakes the sweet, wild month of March.

When the primrose bank turns green in a day
And the trout stream rises and kisses it ;
When the last snow melts on the hawthorn spray,
And it's five o'clock ere the lamps are lit ;
When hoops go out and tops come in,
And chemists' thermometers climb and climb,
And the starling families begin
A quarrel that only ends with time,
And the wren sings high in the highest larch,
Then wakes the sweet wild month of March.

MARCH

When the gardener looks for the sign of a bud
On the rose tree nailed against the wall,
When in trunk and twig the milk-white blood
Throbs, and the yellow catkins fall :
When the brown owl wakes, and the nightingale
Hastens hither from Italy,
And rehearses deep in the glade a scale,
And folks declare it can't be he :
When the wet woods lie in the hands of the wind
As a harp of many strings to play,
When the worm lies dead in the oakapple rind,
And night comes in with the supper tray,
And the wren sings high in the highest larch,
Then wakes the sweet, wild month of March.

The Desert Shrine

SHE kneels with two pale lilies in her hand,
Her cold hand lily-fair,
White robed she kneels upon the yellow sand ;
Her lips move slow in prayer.
On either side the tufted palm trees stand.

There is no odour as of incense, save
The fragrance of her breath ;
No holy water but the tears that lave
Her cheek more pale than death.
On either side the tufted palm trees wave.

With silent tread the first long shadows creep
Across the face of day.
She hath no more to sigh, no more to weep,
Whose prostrate form is clay.
On either side the tufted palm trees sleep.

To a Blackbird

MINSTREL embowered amid the early green,—
Blackbird, thy lyric sweetness, clear and strong,
Falls in a golden flood where late have been
But rascal sparrows' twitters all day long.
Thou art no hireling artist, spruce and lean,
But silence for thy song,—
 This is the only fee
 Thou dost demand of me.

Who is the feathered lady of thy choice,
Sharing in leafy shade thy little throne?
Whoe'er she be methinks she must rejoice
To hear the melody serenely blown,
In thy most amorous voice,
 O pure and happy souled,
 From thine own trump of gold.

Sing on, O singer of the untaught art,
Echo thy joy 'neath fair or cloudy skies;
There is no place for sorrow in thy heart.
Thy song shall swell, thy magic notes shall rise
Till the last sombre shadows shall depart,
And thou in Paradise
 Shalt learn the mysteries
 Of holier harmonies.

The Strayed Londoner

Not mine, another's feet have trod
The golden sand, the heathered hill,
Another's eyes have sought the god
Whose oaten flute is broke and still.
Not mine, another's ears have heard
The choral waves at England's gate
Sing that wild anthem man nor bird
Shall ever make articulate.

Alone amid the peaceful strife
Of epic land and lyric sea,
Some soul, not mine, praised God for life,
And more that living he was free.
Not I, another has beheld
The white-winged traffic by the shore,
Serene as when, in days of eld,
Forth sailed its wind-blown ancestor.

THE STRAYED LONDONER

Another's? Nay, the joy was mine
For one brief hour in very truth,
The seaward smell of salt and pine,
The backward step to dreaming youth.
But who to this Metropolis
Returned, as child from parent strayed,
May, 'neath his jealous mother's kiss,
Admit he wooed a country maid?

On a Copy of Ingres' "La Source"

LIMNED by the magic brush of him
Whose every line is perfect song,
There dwells within my study dim
A maid whose eyes gaze calm and long
Beyond the world's most distant rim.

This painted maiden lyrical,
Holds in raised hands an earthen jar,
Whence, odorous and mystical,
All wonders that in music are
Fall to her white feet virginal.

Motionless thus in sun and shade
She holds her upturned pitcher there,
And sees the seasons bloom and fade ;
And still untaught of hope or care
Her maiden lips no sign have made.

Thus by her feet shall ever flow
Pellucid streams of lyric mirth ;
And she, who holds the charm of woe,
Shall ever gaze beyond the earth,
And look not down and never know.

Fantasia

THIS is the mystic room wherein
Doth burn the white alchemic fire,
Which makes of righteousness or sin
The sweet nutrition of desire.

Unwelcome here no thought shall be ;
Dread Melancholy or Delight
Shall minister in turn to me,
Grave priests by day, frail girls by night.

Here with red sword and thrusting lance
I fight the Goths by hill and fen,
Or face the haughty lords of France,
Or smite the hated Saracen.

Here, when day's last red embers burn
With flickering, uncertain flame,
My face to Mecca do I turn,
And breathe the secret, awful name.

And here, ere my last dream is sped,
I touch black waves of scented hair,
And kiss lips colder than the dead,
And taste afresh the old despair.

Before Spring

THE hollows in the wood are full of leaves,
Brown sodden leaves that died long, long ago,
 The last of Autumn's harvesting.
Some lie beneath a meagre film of snow,
And some are bright and spruce as robin's wing ;
 And these when Winter grieves,
 And draws an icy sigh,
As if she wept in some strange secret dream,
 Are blown in showers far and high,
And fall on many a frozen pool and stream.

The naked trees bend each to each and weep
As if for shame of their gaunt nudity.
 Like children wakened in the dark
They start, and clasp each other fearfully,
And at the wind's voice tremble wan and stark.
 But when the shadows creep
 At eve, in whisperings low,
Their summer gowns of varied green are planned ;
 And happily they smile to know
That April fondly lingers near at hand.

BEFORE SPRING

Sweet April ! Ah, the little Jenny Wren,
First tuneful harbinger of sunny hours,
 Can hear in some remote grey glade,
Perchance can see the very flags and flowers—
The outposts of a royal cavalcade.
 And now by hill and fen,
 Through branches black and bare,
There floats a golden stream of happy song
 That melts the frozen misty air,
And bids Spring's Queen in triumph pass along.

SOME of these verses have been published elsewhere, and for permission to reproduce them in this volume my thanks are due to the Editors of the *Academy*, *Country Life* and the *Daily Mail*.

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